

**A New Movement to Regenerate Trade Unions in Germany  
—The Impacts of Women’s Linkage on Trade Unions—**

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**INTRODUCTION**

The study aims to explore new possibilities and future issues of union movements, shedding light on women’s linkages within and outside existing trade unions and their organic networking. Given the on-going drop in union membership and the quiescence of women’s movements, it is of prime significance for women’s organizations having relatively large memberships to join hands to further women’s movements in a way that raises the visibility of women’s issues in German society. Noting a previous lack of integration between women’s movements and labor movements in the U.S., D. S. Cobble reiterates the importance of labor feminism, the term she uses to refer to this integration (Cobble 2004).

Let us overview the present situation of German women. In 2005, German women’s employment rate surpassed 60%, which amounts to the numerical target set by the European Employment Strategy (EES) to reach 64% in 2007. Yet in reality, the employment relationships women are in remain “precarious” and insecure and their deleterious aspects are shown up in the form of gender pay gaps. Among all 30 OECD member countries, the gender pay gap in the median earnings of full-time employees in Germany is the third largest following Korea and Japan (OECD 2007: 62). The percentage of the gender pay gap in Germany at 22% is greater than the EU average (estimate) of 15% (Commission of the European Communities 2007: 18-19). As such, the gender pay gap came to be highlighted as one of the top-priority issues.

In this background, women unionists and women outside unions began to raise their voices. This study takes up the German Trade Union Federation (*Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund*, henceforth, DGB), Germany’s largest national center and umbrella organization comprised of eight individual unions organized by industry<sup>1</sup>, paying attention to the action known as “*Ich bin mehr wert!*” (I am more valuable) initiated by the DGB Women’s Department in 2008 to tackle the gender pay gap. While a drop in unionization rates suggests that unions have completely lost their luster for many of the German workers, the paper seeks alternative ways for German trade unions, which still exert considerable influences upon the decision-making processes with respect to the collective labor conditions, to regenerate themselves by attaching importance to the impact of women’s movements on trade unions.

This paper first presents background information to this study, i.e., situations of women and industrial relations and traces the process of the labor market reform in Germany in line with the

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<sup>1</sup> IG Bauen-Agrar-Umwelt, IG Bergbau, Chemie, Energie, Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft, IG Metall, Gewerkschaft Nahrung-Genuss-Gaststätten, Gewerkschaft der Polizei, TRANSNET, ver.di–Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft.

EU's labor policy. Second, it analyzes various actions by women to address the gender pay gap issue. Third, it explores the possibilities and limitations of women's movements and in so doing attempts to offer roadmaps for the revival of German trade unions.

## **THE CURRENT SITUATION IN GERMANY**

As is well-known, in Germany, following the principle of collective bargaining autonomy, collective agreements, which are inherent in the German industrial relations, are concluded between employers' associations and trade unions. However, union membership rates are on the constant decline. As of 2008, the union membership was 6.4 billion, a loss of 46% over the figure after the German reunification. While the union membership rate for women is extremely low at approximately 15% of all female employees, DGB women members account for 32% of all DGB members<sup>2</sup>. As more companies are withdrawing from employers' associations and more workers fail to be covered by collective agreements, the number of both business establishments and workers where collective agreements may be applied tends to decline. Collective agreements, which had been the basis for instrumental Germany's industrial relations and thus instrumental in ensuring workers' protection, are now in the state of dysfunction. There have been criticisms of German trade unions and industrial relations from diverse viewpoints, including the demise of the "German model" of industrial relations (Schroeder and Weßels 2003; Hoffman 2006), which have stoked the present intense discussion on the possible introduction of regulations on minimum wages.

Within EU, since the mid-1990s, the fiscal stringency in terms of social security-related expenditures covering unemployment benefits and social aid stemming from a growth of the unemployed has been dramatically turning the course of EU's welfare nations that had hitherto been characterized by protection of workers and welfare expansion ascribed as social Europe into the one that puts emphasis on employment. The catchphrases "From welfare to work" and "Making work pay" express the essence of this policy turnaround. The EES, which had been in effect since 1998, can be deemed as the EU's employment policy that mirrors this major turnaround. In March 2003, the Commission declared "full employment" and set the relevant numerical targets for the employment rate overall at 70% and for women at 60% to be achieved by 2010 (EU 2003). Subsequently, in July 2003 amid the second phase of the EES, new employment guidelines to be achieved by the target year 2010 were formulated with the three overall objectives in mind: sustainable economic growth, improvement in the quality and productivity at work, and reinforcement of social cohesion<sup>3</sup>. The guidelines provide that Member States are to encourage female labor market participation and achieve a substantial reduction in gender gaps in employment rates, unemployment rates, and pay by 2010. In particular, the elimination of the gender pay gap is stressed, which may be achieved by addressing sectoral and occupational segregation, education and training, job classifications and pay systems. The guidelines again point out the crucial role of social partners, as they are directly involved in these factors (EU Council 2003).

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.dgb.de/dgb/mitgliederzahlen/index\\_html](http://www.dgb.de/dgb/mitgliederzahlen/index_html)

<sup>3</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/employment\\_social/employment\\_strategy/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/employment_strategy/index_en.htm)

Within Germany, in a package of the labor market reforms by the 2<sup>nd</sup> term Schröder administration (SPD) between fall 2002 and fall 2005, Germany embarked on actualizing the EU's reform concepts by reforming the labor market so as to speedily incorporate the unemployment and by downgrading workers' safety nets through the remodeling of the social security system, to be commonly referred to the Hartz I-IV Laws. The Hartz Laws came under sharp attack; the criticisms concentrated on the fact that the Laws resulted in the expansion of a new form of non-regular employment called "mini-jobs," low-wage jobs with salaries below EUR 400 per month. Hartz II took advantage of mini-jobs, which had previously been available but very small in number, as a means of enforcing the employment policy to raise employment rates and thereby promote social cohesion. Because of "exemptions" from social security and pension contributions, mini-jobs are easily "accessible" to workers, which in turn expanded employment opportunities. However, the policy manipulation to attract the working population to such precarious and insecure mini-jobs forced women to take on low-wage jobs, in which workers would likely face difficulties in sustaining their standard of living. In this respect, the concepts behind the Hartz Laws run counter to those of gender mainstreaming as long as they seek to preserve the image of the traditional family consisting of a "husband as the main male breadwinner" plus a "wife working to supplement the family budget" (Kurz-Sherf 2002: 88-89). They are also fraught with problems from the viewpoint of reduction of the gender pay gap, since most of these low-wage jobs are not covered by collective agreements.

True that these reforms did help Germany to achieve the EU's target for women's employment rate, but we should also say they also had led to negative repercussions for female workers by increasing the already high rate of non-regular workers among women and lowering the quality of female labor considerably.

## **WOMEN'S EFFORT-MAKING**

### **Surfacing of the "Gender Pay Gap" Issue and Its Background**

Among the principal factors of the gender wage gap often cited in the literature are vertical and horizontal segregation which represents women's generally low educational standards and the resulting difficulty in finding a job requiring high qualifications as well as the concentration of women workers in typically low-wage traditional "women's jobs" and hence limited chances of promotion; a growing number of women in non-regular employment, including part-time work and more recently mini-jobs; and more frequent career breaks taken by women than men to balance work and family life. So far the German government and social partners have adopted wide-ranging measures: facilitating women's promotion to managerial positions; launching the "Girls' Day" campaign with the objective of expanding the spectrum of school girls' career options especially in technical fields; and expanding childcare leave programs to men. Despite such efforts and the outstanding improvement of women's educational attainment almost level with men's, the gender pay gap issue continues to afflict German society as an intractable issue.

### **Women's Diverse Activism**

**Women's activities in 2008.** In the spring of 2008, women began to raise their voice against

the “gender pay gap,” which took shape as the two campaigns, the “Equal Pay Day” and “*Ich bin mehr wert.*”

**“Equal Pay Day” and the “Red Purse Campaign”** The Equal Pay Day campaign was led by Business and Professional Women-Germany (BPW)--a national organization of professional women established in 1951 consisting of 38 clubs and 1,759 members--with the objective of exposing the “gender pay gap” issue to the general public. Reflecting on overall lack of sufficient interests in the issue in Germany in the past despite the public’s awareness of the problem, BPW staged action to provide a space for open-end discussions through the mobilization of women<sup>4</sup>. BPW introduced the “Equal Pay Day” campaign into Germany already in 2007 as one of the events of the European year of equal opportunities, importing the idea from the “Red Purse Campaign” initiated by the American Business and Professional Women in 1988. The official “first” “Equal Pay Day” Campaign was conducted in the following year on April 15, 2008, with supports by the Federal Ministry for Families, Seniors, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) and the German Women’s Council (Deutscher Frauenrat, DF), a national council organized in 1951 of more than fifty nationwide women’s associations and organizations with a membership of 1.1 million, and other women’s groups. In one of the biggest events known as the “Red Purse Campaign”, the organizers distributed red bags in 31 cities within Germany to the participants to raise the awareness of the problem among the general public. In particular, this campaign sought to call the following facts to attention: Women in Germany on the “Equal Pay Day” earned as much as men on December 31, 2007; the income difference is a national economic disaster; less wage also means less money for families, social protection, pension, investments and less tax revenue; and women often work part time, in badly paid industries, in small companies and are even paid worse in the same company; and due to family breaks, women have worse career chances and miss out on promotion (Schleicher 2008: 2). Moreover, the color red served as a means to take note of the “red figures” in the purses of women.

**“*Ich Bin Mehr Wert.*”** The campaign “*Ich bin mehr wert*” was launched in Munich under the initiatives of the DGB Women’s Department together with the DGB’s eight umbrella industrial unions on March 8, 2008, celebrated as the International Women’ Day. Apparently, this campaign “*Ich bin mehr wert*” is not attributed to the sole effort of the DGB Women’s Department. In response to its call for action, a total of six women’s groups joined the move and unite themselves to be known as “Frauenbündnis”: DF, BPW, and other groups of women professionals, including *der Deutscher Journalistinnenbund*, *der Verbandes der medizinischen Fachberufe*, and *der Deutschen Akademikerinnenbund*<sup>5</sup>. According to the Director of the DGB Women’s Department, all these women’s groups are the member associations of DF, but until then, they had been addressing the gender pay gap issue independently from other women’s groups. They realized the importance of building linkages in order to bring a huge surge of concern within Germany. During this campaign that lasted one year, fully funded by the DBG (2,000 euro)<sup>6</sup>, the DGB Women’s Department under its own initiatives carried out various

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bpw-germany.de/>

<sup>5</sup> Joint press conference on March 4, 2008 (<http://www.frauenrat.de>)

<sup>6</sup> Based on the author’s interview with the director of the DGB Women’s Department (henceforth,

activities across Germany, receiving support from women's groups in each venue <sup>7</sup>.

The campaign was aimed at appealing to the public the necessity of work life balance, more career chances for women, and the closing of the gender pay gap (DGB 2008a: 10-11). In the view of the DGB Women's Department, closing the gender pay gap is one of the most important pillars of gender equality policies. The reason that the Department placed the gender pay gap issue on the top-priority agenda was that in the realms of politics, emphasis was placed on family policies whereas gender equality policies were relegated to the background and more importantly labor issues had been insufficiently discussed<sup>8</sup>. In November 2005, Angela Merkel (CDU) took office as Germany's first female Chancellor. "With the emergence of a female chancellor, people heightened expectations for progress in gender equality policies. But Chancellor Merkel was not necessarily committed to implementing gender equality policies. BMFSFJ Minister Ursula von der Leyen put greater emphasis on family policies and expanded programs to support work-life balance but not necessarily integrated the perspective of gender equality." "Measures for balancing work and family are undoubtedly essential. The problem is that government officials and employers take it for granted that if those measures are effectively implemented as part of family support programs, the problems of lack of women's career chances and the gender pay gap are automatically solved." An increase in the employment rates for women after the Hartz Reform was offset by the downgrade of women's labor, thereby triggering an increase in the number of women in precarious employment relationships. The gender pay gap is rather avoided by both unions and employers, each claiming that it should be handled by the other. It was the Department's mission to politicize the gender pay gap issue and exert political pressure on unions and employers from all sides to tackle the issue<sup>9</sup>.

The main activities for this campaign included dissemination of flyers, launching of a new website, and holding of events to increase women's activism. The event organizers utilized a variety of image-driven strategies. For example, in the summer of 2008, they printed "78-euro bills" imitating 100-euro bills as campaign goods to underline the fact that on the average women's wage was 22% less than that of men's. Then in what they called the "moustache action" to increase gender awareness, balancing of work and family life, and women's limited opportunities for promotion, the participants, wearing false moustaches, marched in the city, distributing postcards printed with such messages as: "With this moustache on, am I able to earn 22% more?", "With this moustache on, am I able to build my career while raising my kids?", and "With this moustache on, am I allowed to sit in the bosses' chair?"

**Women's Activities in 2009.** The subsequent efforts made in March 2009 onwards developed into another big surge which gained the involvement of economic organizations to be dubbed as Germany's "national united action of the Equal Pay Day"<sup>10</sup>. DF and BPW are again participating

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Director W) in Berlin on Feb. 26, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Based on the author's interview with Director W in Berlin on Sept. 9, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Based on the author's interview with Director W in Berlin on March 11, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Based on the author's interview with Director W in Berlin on Sept. 9, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> "Nationales Aktionsbündnis, Equal Pay Day, Entgeltgleichheit schaffen – Ursachen angehen" ([http://www.frauenrat.de/fileadmin/Website\\_Archiv/files/Aufruf\\_EPD\\_2009.pdf](http://www.frauenrat.de/fileadmin/Website_Archiv/files/Aufruf_EPD_2009.pdf))

in this action, with the following first-time participants: *Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft kommunaler frauen Büros*, an association of women in charge of local governments and two economic organizations, i.e., a group of female entrepreneurs named vdu (*Verband Deutscher Unternehmerinnen*), and the Confederation of German Employers' Associations (BDA), functioning as a representative body of German employers. This time, the DGB is not participating in the action as a body but instead merely supporting it since the Director of the DGB Women's Department doubles DF's vice president. This non-participation is attributed to the difference in views toward discrimination against women. The DGB realizes that women are being discriminated in their working life, whereas BDA contends that there exists no discrimination against women in the field of employment. Such being the case, the DBG Women's Department, having keenly perceived the need to "retain its unique status as a trade union and its mission to independently address the closing of the gender pay gap," is publicizing its views at its newly launched website "*Entgeltgleichheit*,<sup>11</sup>" meaning pay equity<sup>12</sup>.

## **THE IMPACTS OF WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS UPON TRADE UNIONS AND THE REMAINING ISSUES**

### **The Impacts of Women's Movements upon Trade Unions**

The campaign "*Ich bin mehr wehr*" in which women in their concerted efforts took action can indeed be assessed as a success in the sense that it rendered the gender pay gap issue visible and appealed to the general public through its wide exposure to the media while making women in general more aware of the issue. What would then be the long-term effect of this whole campaign? How would the achievements of the campaign be reflected in the policies of trade unions? I would say that at this point it is too early to answer these questions; what I can do here is to provide my visions for the future of labor feminism. A series of women's challenging actions to confront head on the gender pay gap, which had not shown any sign of reduction for a long time, certainly motivated women themselves to raise their voices in their pursuit for their own rights as the main agents. These actions aroused working women's consciousness of their rights and made women unionists a visible presence in society, which are suggestive of a new wave of women's movements soon to be coming to upturn the present ebb tide. It is to be hoped that these women's movements would generate a positive impact not only upon the government and employers but also trade unions in a significant way. Male unionists still espouse the outdated image of gender to the effect that men should protect men themselves as breadwinners so women's work should be just enough to supplement the family budget<sup>13</sup>. To refute such men's belief is no mean feat. Whether it was possible at all to change the mentality of such male unionists through these women's actions leaves much to be questioned; a pile of unresolved issues lie ahead. The reality is that male unionists, including the members of the collective bargaining commission, "believe" that collective agreements are devoid of discriminatory elements, let alone the gender pay gap. Therefore, it remains to be vital for the

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.entgeltgleichheit.de/>

<sup>12</sup> Based on the author's interview with Director W in Berlin on Feb. 26, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Based on the author's interview with Director W in Berlin on Sept. 9, 2008.

DGB Women's Department to join hands with women's groups outside unions, such as DF, and to exert pressure on those men to change their way of thinking.

### **Trade Unions' Measures for the Closing of the Gender Pay Gap.**

What would be the feasible plan of action that trade unions could carry out now to minimize the gender pay gap? One is to overhaul collective agreements and works agreements, both of which constitute the foundations of trade unions. The second is to lobby for the legislation of the Equal Treatment Law for the elimination of discrimination at private companies, as well as the Minimum Wage Law. In the rest of this section, I will concentrate on the first point and examine trade unions' measures and the remaining issues, particularly with respect to collective agreements.

As early as in the beginning of the 1950s, trade unions abolished the women-only category "*Leichtlohngruppe*" categorized under the wage system. However, the issue was left intact until the 2000s when the trade unions began the reform of collective agreements. Even then, since the collective agreements had not been reviewed from the perspectives of gender equality "for decades,"<sup>14</sup> it was only a handful of industrial unions, like IG-Metall and ver.di, that did embark on the development and adoption of gender discrimination-free collective agreements and as a matter of fact, there has been no major progress in this move. As a first step, the DGB Women's Department is determined to check the elements that constitute collective agreements and in this process to identify those jobs which are not evaluated by these collective agreements, as well as to re-examine how women are categorized within the wage system at the level of business establishments<sup>15</sup>. For reasons of space, here I will just emphasize the fact that along with the revision of collective agreements, it is essential to appoint more women as collective bargaining commission members to take part in collective bargaining and to garner extensive support from the Women's Department and the Collective Agreements Department within each industrial union (DGB 2008b).

### **CONCLUSION**

While the DGB Women's Department is playing a pivotal role as a department in charge of women's/gender policies to narrow the gender pay gap, it is all too evident that the reform of a system of collective agreements cannot be achieved by the sole efforts of the Department. Although there have been no remarkable improvements in spite of the introduction of gender mainstreaming through the reform of DBG's basic principles in 1997 and then its Bylaws in 2002 (Yuki 2008), gender mainstreaming should be implemented as soon as possible as part of measures for collective agreements, which may be said to constitute the fundamental base of union activities, in order to remove the stigma as a nation with the third widest gender pay gap. Not only the Women's Department, but also the main body of the DBG should proactively get involved in this move as it is not participating in the on-going "united action" in 2009 and is

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<sup>14</sup> Based on the author's interview with Director W in Berlin on Sept. 9, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Based on the author's interview with Director W in Berlin on March 11, 2008.

determined to follow its independent path.

Trade unions can no longer avoid the problems of non-regular employment as well as gender issues; without the ability to properly handle these problems, trade unions will certainly end up representing only the privileged group, that is, male regular workers. By earnestly committing itself to gender issues, the DGB would very likely exert beneficial influences on member unions of in the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) to an immeasurable extent, for the DGB continues to show a strong presence in ETUC.

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