Immigrants in European Labor Unions: Organizational Pitfall or Potential?

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The recent surge in anti-immigrant movements and parties in Europe such as Pegida in Germany, the National Front in France, and Golden Dawn in Greece, reflects the way in which immigration has elicited intense, even violent opposition from native populations. My research investigates the problem this opposition to immigration poses to labor unions. Native workers make up the bulk of union members and lobby unions to prioritize policies that favor natives over immigrants. At the same time, although many native workers favor employment
protectionism, immigrant members still turn to labor unions to improve their working conditions and amplify their political voice. As a recipient of a Council for European Studies Dissertation Fellowship, I have explored the question of when and why unions engage in pro-immigrant action in my dissertation, “Fair-Weather Friends? Explaining Labor Union Support for Immigrants in Western Europe.”

My research shows how unions engage in pro-immigrant action when immigrant leaders articulate a mobilizing identity and then form alliances with native workers to pressure union leadership. Furthermore, the incidence of pro-immigrant action is stronger in weaker, more fragmented unions. Different chapters address each of three issue areas in which immigrant workers seek union support: confronting the xenophobia of far-right movements, combating job marginalization or dualization, and addressing discrimination. While such issues afflict some native workers, they hobble immigrant workers in particular ways. In contrast to native workers, all immigrants are the target of far-right mobilization. For issues of discrimination and job marginalization, immigrant workers lack the cultural resources of natives with which to gain redress. My argument about the way in which immigrant actions combined with alliances can elicit support from unions is based in large part on four cases of immigrant protest. Two public hospitals, one in Germany and one in the United Kingdom (UK) – which underwent privatization – as well as at two German and British auto plants – where immigrants mobilized against the far right at work and in the community – form the bulk of my evidence.

Between 2009 and 2012, I spent 16 months conducting fieldwork in Denmark, Germany, and the UK. Trade union activists, managers, politicians, and leaders of non-governmental organizations served as key informants for more than 120 in-depth interviews (many conducted in German) from which my dissertation draws. I also collected archival data from the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Library in Bonn, Germany, and the Trade Unions’ Congress collection at London Metropolitan University in the UK, in addition to conducting observational research at events and protests in multiple sectors, including manufacturing and public hospitals.

**The importance of unions**

Labor unions have been critical to the political incorporation of the working class in European democracies for at least a century. In electoral politics, unions played decisive roles in extending the franchise to wage-earning men as well as in founding and sustaining left-wing parties.1 In the economic realm, some unions gave workers decision-making powers through employee councils at firms and representation on company boards.2 Furthermore, many unions leveraged their working-class voter base and social democratic party support to gain seats at national forums tasked with developing social and economic policy. Although unions in both the historical and contemporary period have supported the expansion of social welfare policies to benefit the working class, unions have had mixed records when it comes to extending gains to workers of a different ethnicity, race, or national origin. In fact, unions across my country cases initially opposed post-WWII migration from the Mediterranean rim and former colonies that had been encouraged by politicians as a solution to post-conflict labor shortages in the economy.3

**Native-immigrant cleavages within unions**

Organizational survival demands that labor


unions neutralize competition among different factions of member subgroups. Labor unions face decisions about which member subgroup demands to prioritize over others. Fragmented organizations with low union density, such as British labor unions, face greatly reduced pressure to keep member dissent in check than the encompassing organizations of Danish labor unions. Immigrant workers form an important such subgroup of labor union members in Western Europe. However, unions stand to reap both gains and losses should they decide to support immigrant claims. Unions can make inroads into immigrant communities as sources of potential members when they choose to engage in pro-immigrant action. At the same time, addressing the concerns of immigrant members can also hurt unions if it alienates native union members with anti-immigrant views.

Danish unions, German unions and British unions differ in their willingness to support immigrant interests. In contrast to expectations that the strongest unions or those with high degrees of corporatism have the most to offer all categories of worker-members, Danish unions are the least likely to address the concerns of immigrant members, whereas British unions – among the weakest unions in Western Europe – are the most likely to support immigrant member interests. Germany is a mixed case, in which moderately strong unions engage in some kinds of pro-immigrant actions but not others. A key finding of my dissertation research is that the most encompassing unions are effectively less inclusive as a result of their efforts to maintain unity among their members.

**Immigrants as a source of union renewal**

Existing scholarly accounts of when and why unions choose to support the concerns of immigrant members highlight immigrants as catalysts for organization renewal for unions. Since the 1970s, the percentage of the workforce organized by unions has been falling across most industrialized countries. In a parallel development over the same period, the size of the immigrant population in the global North has grown. Immigrants’ increasing share of the population and workforce suggests that immigrant workers could be a source of organizational renewal for unions.
seeking to stabilize and increase member numbers in the medium and long term. Milkman and others have used the United States (US) union context to argue that when faced with steep declines in traditional member constituencies, unions can develop organizing strategies to attract members from unorganized groups such as immigrant workers.

Drawing primarily from studies of American unions and workplaces, the literature on union renewal provides limited purchase on the degree to which immigrants in non-US settings could serve as catalysts for union renewal. Researchers also remain in the dark about the options available to unions as they adjudicate competing demands from native and immigrant members. As my dissertation embeds a cross-national research design, it accounts for variation in the institutional resources of unions and differences in membership decline across unions. This project also generates insights into how unions deal with conflict between native and immigrant members by examining specific issue areas of immigrant demands.

Case study: Addressing immigrant job marginalization in public hospitals

The public hospital case studies that I explore in my dissertation examine two groups of unionized immigrant workers trapped in jobs with poor pay, benefits, and working conditions. Immigrant workers in a British public hospital and immigrant workers in a German public hospital walked off the job in protest of job marginalization. Only in the British hospital were immigrant workers able to exercise agency, forge alliances with native co-workers, secure support from the union leadership, and improve working conditions. By contrast, in the German hospital, immigrant workers did not exercise agency, but rather set up weak partnerships with native co-workers and did not succeed in gaining support from union leaders. In the British case, immigrant worker members realized their potential as a mobilized member subgroup of the union, whereas in the German case, immigrant workers remained under-utilized as political allies by unions.

The realization of immigrant potential in the UK

Several immigrant employees working in cleaning and catering at Great Western hospital outside of Bristol walked off the job during the winter of 2012. As members of the GMB union, these immigrant workers sought to improve working conditions and opportunities for advancement. Immigrant workers at this hospital were subject to arbitrary behavior from management, including bullying and harassment. In the British hospital, immigrant workers mobilized around race, attributing poor working conditions to “racism from supervisors,” and the fact that they were “dark-skinned.” Immigrant workers took the initiative in building a partnership with native GMB union officials. Their partnership was a fruitful one, and GMB union officials helped to build a coalition of unions supporting the cause of immigrant workers. For example, one community protest in March 2012 had several hundred participants, among them union officials and members from Unite, UNISON, and other GMB branches. As a result of agency exercised by immigrant workers and alliances initiated by immigrant workers with native trade unionists, immigrant workers at Great Western Hospital were able to secure GMB leadership support in holding and publicizing strikes. Together, they put pressure on the employer with the result that a manager responsible for many incidents of bullying resigned, and disputes over back-pay and vacation time were resolved.

Immigrant members as pitfalls in Germany

In contrast to immigrant members at the British hospital, immigrant union members at the German hospital examined in my dissertation did not succeed in improving their working conditions through union leadership support. During most of the year of 2011, immigrant workers at the

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Charité hospital in Berlin went on strike in protest of low wages and poor working conditions. Media coverage deemed wage levels for many cleaners and caterers at the German hospital to be unacceptably low, with reports of hourly wages of 5.5 euros per hour. Journalists also uncovered health and safety violations, as many of these workers did not have access to proper protective equipment. Immigrant workers aimed to improve their status by securing a collective bargaining agreement with their employer.

Despite facing challenges similar to their counterparts in the British hospital, immigrant union members at the German hospital did not exercise agency in mobilization, as they lacked a mobilizing identity. Immigrant informants disagreed about the role of identity in explaining shared poor working conditions. Immigrant workers in the German hospital also did not initiate a partnership with native trade unionists at the Ver.di trade union to improve their working conditions. Rather, they were junior partners in an alliance created by native trade unionists. This weak alliance fell apart after a short period of cooperation. Immigrant workers did not succeed in gaining the union leadership support needed to compel their employer to sign a collective agreement, thereby improving their working conditions.

As a result of the immigrant agency exerted to build an alliance with native trade unionists, immigrant workers in the British hospital not only succeeded in gaining union support for their concern with job marginalization, but they delivered organizational gains for the union as well. Since the GMB was willing to accept immigrant mobilization around race, it broadened its appeal to immigrants and minorities inside and outside of the union. The GMB has begun to realize the potential of immigrant members. On the other hand, immigrant members’ failure to exercise agency in mobilization and then to initiate a partnership with native union members at the German hospital resulted in an unfulfilled partnership with the union, Ver.di. Not only did immigrants fail to gain a solution to job marginalization, but Ver.di suffered an organizational setback as well. The union’s inability to deliver gains for immigrant members risks the designation of both unionized and non-unionized immigrants as “a problem group,” with unions unwilling to expend resources on them. It also risks bolstering immigrants viewing unions as unable and unwilling to address their interests.